

Mesmerising Macau



Waterfront location of Hotel Sofitel - Macau at Ponte 16



A woman selling pressed meats (at Senado Square)

VIJAYA PRATAP

I was told that Hong Kong's skyline is one of the most beautiful and I shouldn't miss it while landing. But I missed it. I slept through the whole flight and beyond. The mid-night flight I took from Hyderabad was the culprit. But it landed me at the Hong Kong airport at a comfortable hour (thanks to the time difference) and there I was, in the Turbo Jet (Ferry to Macau). After a smooth sail of 50 minutes, I arrived at my destination, the beautiful city, Macau.

A ten minute ride into the centre of the city, I was in for a pleasant surprise. Amidst the charming historic quarter, blending with the

classical architecture of its surroundings, the elegant façade of 'Sofitel- Macau at Ponte 16', greeted me. As I checked in, I was totally bowled over by the grandeur of the luxury French hotel. Located within a walking distance to the UNESCO world heritage sites, the hotel is a glamorous mix of classic and modern styles. The view from my room on the 13th floor was a big bonus! The picturesque waterfront with anchored boats on one side and the blue and inviting pool on the other..... can't ask for more!

Macau is a city where 'Two Worlds' merge; European and Chinese, heritage and modernity. Over history, Macau has been an important gateway through which western civilisation entered China. For hundreds of years, this piece of land has nurtured a symbiosis of cultural exchange, shaping the unique identity of Macau. The charm of the city is captivating. The artful blending of cultures is revealed in the visual ambience of classic Portuguese architecture, with a subtle mix of traditional Chinese design and European style. In contrast is the glamorous nightlife of the rapidly

FAST FACTS

Getting there: Direct flights to Hong Kong from major Indian cities: Cathay Pacific etc
Visa: No visa required for Indian citizens

From Hong Kong to Macau: Ferry is a good option www.turbojet.com.hk One can do through check-in and collect the baggage only at the final destination. No need to go through any formalities in Hong Kong airport. After landing, one can directly go to the ferry terminal, which is within the HK Airport

Stay: Sofitel- Macau is a five star luxury hotel. If one wants to splurge, www.sofitel.com. There are also many other hotels of different categories.

For further information: <http://macautourism.gov.mo/en/>

emerging gaming and entertainment hub.

Macau's main square is paved with wave patterned stone mosaic, created especially by experts from Portugal, which extends from Senado Square to St. Paul's. The Square that has been a civic hub for centuries, is now pedestrianised and contains an elegant fountain, trees, benches, cafés and space for public events. At one end of the Square is the Civic and Municipal Affairs Bureau and opposite is the Holy House of Mercy, dating from the 16th century and the oldest western charity institution in China.

The bustling Senado Square, with its old world charm, transported me to another time frame. The setting was old but the people were modern. I saw gold shops bursting with women on shopping sprees. The pawn shops where the practice of mortgaging follows the Chinese tradition, and the counter of the shop is typically higher than the average person for security.

In over four centuries Macau has not only inspired architecture of different traditions, it has preserved and maintained an extra ordinary number of its buildings making them part of everyday. As a result, within a short distance, you can find Taoist temples from the Ming dynasty and Baroque churches

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Senado Square - General post office building

from the 18th century; hilltop fortresses from the 17th century and classic China Coast shop houses; the oldest European theatre in Asia and the first Western light house; colonial palaces and Chinese courtyards.

I had the most memorable dining experience in Macau. When the Portuguese arrived in Asia, they brought food stuffs and cooking ideas from their settlements in Africa, South America and India, as well as from their home country. These were combined and adapted by the local Chinese to create a truly International cuisine. You will find this interesting fare in restaurants, to suit every taste and budget. In the pastry shops, one can get the best of cakes and cookies. Traditional Chinese delicacies like dried meats, mushrooms, shrimp, scallops etc are found in many shops. The aroma spreads across and these shops can't be missed.

Macau is a place that can make life slow down and make you look inwards. Fully satiated, I left the fascinating place, only to come back home, with rich memories. This time, I was wide awake and enjoyed the splendid skyline of Hong Kong!



Interior of Hotel Sofitel - Macau

TRENDING NOW

It's now 'Get Set Go' for women

"Sign me up!" says one woman. "I want to be a part of this too," states another. These words are from the Facebook page of a travel club, and there are hundreds of comments of enthusiastic women vying with each other to let their hair down and go on a holiday to some place exotic and unexplored - alone

first all-women trip to Leh-Ladakh, a journey she had recently undertaken. With experiences of altitude sickness and problems of acclimatisation still fresh in her mind, she was confident about planning a good trip for others.

"The first two or three people to sign up were friends, who understood my passion. But the rest of the 25 who finally came on board were strangers who learnt about this initiative through word of mouth," she reveals. Bose, however, had to do her bit to meet husbands and families of the women travellers to convince them that safety would not be compromised.

The trip proved to be a roaring success and for Bose, there has been no looking back. Today, GOG organises 20-25 group departures to various domestic and international destinations every year. Apart from this, her group also plans the itineraries of women who

wish to travel alone.

Very similar to Bose and GOG's story is Sumitra Senapaty's travel club, Women on Wanderlust (WOW). A travel writer, Senapaty had travelled the world for stories. Eight years ago, when she was travelling in New Zealand, she came across a group of women from the UK in a cafe who, she thought, were friends travelling together, but were actually part of a travel club. The novelty of the idea struck her forcefully.

"It seemed to me that Indian women were waiting for something like this. Although I did not do anything about it immediately - I had no business background and was content with my work and life - discussions with my friends and family encouraged me to give it a shot," recalls Senapaty, who is Bangalore-based. Keeping in mind the need to strike off the beaten track and give women participants a sense of adven-

ture, WOW's first trip was also to Leh. Today, Senapaty's club does almost 80 group trips a year, a testimony to its success.

Both these travel clubs stress on the fact that they are "not travel agencies", and hence don't just take their subscribers to places but add special touches to make the holiday a personal and memorable experience.

For instance, sometimes these trips have themes. Explains Bose, "For instance, we undertake culinary trips to Morocco, or a trip to Spain or Nagaland in Northeast India to coincide with a festival. Even when we are travelling to 'tourist-y' places, we create a difference. We went to Jaipur during the Lit Fest to meet authors; in Jodhpur we stayed with a Bishnoi family and saw black bucks. Our upcoming Ladakh trip will coincide with the colourful Hemis festival. The idea is that the traveller gets to experience the place with its people and culture."

Special women-centric activities are also thrown in. "We include activities that women would enjoy - like a hot stone bath in Bhutan, which is like a local spa treatment, or a handicraft workshop in Rajasthan. And since we believe that a holiday is all about letting your hair down, we explore the night life too. We take care of safety and you have the fun," explains Bose.

Similar activities form a part of the itinerary at WOW - a cooking lesson in Kerala, or a spa session in Gokarna -

to make things more interesting. Senapaty says that the groups have a good mix of women of all ages and professional backgrounds. They all see group travel as a comfortable and cheaper option. Those who have done these trips generally come away with happy memories. Purna Vadra Kohli, who travelled to Ladakh with WOW, is eternally grateful for what she terms as an "experience of a life time".

"The age group of women travelling with us range from 12-80," says Bose. But a self-selective process ensures that each segment settles for a trip of its choice. "In our upcoming Antarctica trip, it will mostly be middle-aged and younger women. Older women join in, depending on the type of trip," says Bose. Another upcoming trip for GOG is to Mongolia. In WOW's itinerary for the upcoming months are Russia, South Africa, Bulgaria, Borneo, among others. A group is travelling to Tanzania at present.

While most of the women signing up are from the metros, there is a growing interest in such trips from women living in tier 1 and 2 cities as well. What's more, a growing number of men are calling up these travel clubs to see how they can gift a trip to their wives, daughters or granddaughters.

Bose signs off with these words, "When I started out some people said this idea was stupid, and was ahead of time. They clearly underestimated Indian woman!"



Women-only travel clubs, a relatively new phenomenon, allow groups of like-minded strangers to get together for a holiday, knowing that their safety and comfort is guaranteed. (Picture Credit: GOG)

AZERA PARVEEN RAHMAN

Welcome to women-only travel clubs of India, institutions that allow groups of like-minded strangers to get together for a holiday, knowing that their safety and comfort is guaranteed. Kind of like a dream-come-true? Yes, and judging by the flood of responses that they elicit from travellers and potential travellers on websites ad social media pages, they are hot favourites as well.

A travel club only for women is a fairly new concept in India. Today, it has caught the fancy of women of all ages - from teenagers and young professionals to mothers and even grandmothers. Many of those who had signed on had always wanted to travel but could not, either because the schedules of family members and friends did not quite permit them to take wing or because they were hesitant to travel alone for safety considerations.

Piya Bose, who traded her career as a successful corporate lawyer to start Girls On the Go (GOG), a women-only travel club in 2008, informs that the birth of the idea took place when she was travelling by herself and noticed that there were hardly any other Indian women like her. Says Bose, who is based in Mumbai, "I have always enjoyed travelling on my own, and have been doing so since I was 16 when I

went to South America. What I noticed was that while there were foreigners travelling on their own, there were hardly any Indian women doing so."

The turning point came when, at the age of 25, Bose decided to quit her job and do something "meaningful" with her life. Her quest took her on a "random trip" to Lucknow, the historical state capital of Uttar Pradesh, where a rickshaw puller suggested she could go to Nepal. She did just that and finally ended up in Tibet! "That was a life changing trip for me. When you stand looking at the Mount Everest, you don't come back the same person," remarks Bose, adding that once she returned she decided to give shape to her long held dream of setting up a travel club solely for women.

It was not easy at first. Her family thought it was a stupid idea but Bose decided to hang on. She planned her

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- Piya Bose, Founder, Girls On The Go



Members of Girls On the Go (GOG), a women-only travel club that was set up in 2008, explore the wonders of Greece